

Remarks by President Obama at G20 Press Conference | November 16, 2014

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November 16, 2014

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

November 16, 2014

Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Center
Brisbane, Australia

4:19 P.M. AEST

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Thank you, everybody. Please have a seat. Good afternoon. I want to begin by thanking Prime Minister Abbott, the people of Brisbane, and the people of Australia for being such extraordinary hosts for the G20. All the arrangements were terrific and, as always, the people of Australia could not have been friendlier and better organized. So I very much appreciate everything that you have done.

We had a lot of good discussions during the course of the G20, but as our Australian friends say, this wasn't just a "good old chinwag." I really love that expression. (Laughter.) It was a productive summit. And so I want to thank Tony for his leadership, and the people of Brizzy truly did shine throughout this process with their hospitality.

This is the final day of a trip that has taken me across the Asia Pacific -- a visit that comes against the backdrop of America's renewed economic strength. The United States is in the longest stretch of uninterrupted private sector job growth in its history. Over the last few years, we've put more people back to work than all the other advanced economies combined. And this growing economic strength at home set the stage for the progress that we have made on this trip. It's been a good week for American leadership and for American workers.

We made important progress in our efforts to open markets to U.S. goods and to boost the exports that support American jobs. We continue to make progress toward the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Our agreement with China to extend visas for business people, tourists and students is going to boost tourism, grow our two economies and create jobs for Americans and Chinese alike. We also agreed with China to pursue a bilateral investment treaty, as well as agreeing on an approach to the Information Technology Agreement that is estimated would support some 60,000 American jobs. And here at the G20, China committed to greater transparency on its economic data, including its foreign

exchange reserves. And this is a step toward the market-driven exchange rate that we've been pushing for because it would promote a level playing field for American businesses and American workers.

Here in Brisbane, all the G20 countries announced strategies to increase growth and put people back to work, including a new initiative to support jobs by building infrastructure. Our nations made commitments that could bring another 100 million women into our collective workforce. We took new steps toward strengthening our banks, closing tax loopholes for multinational companies, and stopping tax evaders and criminals from hiding behind shell companies. And these were all very specific provisions. These were not just goals that were set without any substance behind them. We have made very concrete progress during the course of the last several G20 sessions in preventing companies from avoiding the taxes that they owe in their home countries, including the United States, and making sure that we've got a financial system that's more stable and that can allow a bank to fail without taxpayers having to bail them out.

Meanwhile, the breakthrough the United States achieved with India this week allows for a resumption of talks on a global trade deal that would mean more growth and prosperity for all of us.

This week, we also took historic steps in the fight against climate change. The ambitious new goal that I announced in Beijing will double the pace at which America reduces its carbon pollution while growing our economy and creating jobs, strengthening our energy security, and putting us on the path to a low carbon future. Combined with China's commitment -- China for the first time committed to slowing and then peaking and then reversing the course of its emissions -- we're showing that there's no excuse for other nations to come together, both developed and developing, to achieve a strong global climate agreement next year.

The \$3 billion contribution to the Green Climate Fund that I announced yesterday will help developing nations deal with climate change, reduce their carbon pollution and invest in clean energy. I want to commend, by the way, Prime Minister Abe and Japan for their \$1.5 billion pledge to the Fund. And following the steps we've taken in the United States, many of the G20 countries agreed to work to improve the efficiency of heavy-duty vehicles, which would be another major step in reducing emissions.

And finally, I'm pleased that more nations are stepping up and joining the United States in the effort to end the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. Coming on the heels of our Global Health Security Agenda in the United States, the G20 countries committed to helping nations like those in West Africa to build their capacity to prevent, detect and respond to future outbreaks before they become epidemics.

So from trade to climate change to the fight against Ebola, this was a strong week for American leadership. And the results will be more jobs for the American people; historic steps towards a cleaner and healthier planet; and progress towards saving lives not just in

West Africa, but eventually in other places. If you ask me, I'd say that's a pretty good week. The American people can be proud of the progress that we've made. I intend to build on that momentum when I return home tomorrow.

And with that, I am going to take a few questions. I've got my cheat-sheet here. And we're going to start with Matt Spetalnick of Reuters.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Some of your fellow G20 leaders took an in-your-face approach with President Putin. You had conversations --

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I'm sorry, with President --

Q With President Putin.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Oh, I see.

Q Took a kind of confrontational approach to him. You had brief discussions with him at APEC. How confrontational or not were those encounters? Did you have any further exchanges with him here? What, if any, progress did you make with him on the Ukraine issue? And, of course, you've now just met with EU leaders. Did you agree on further sanctions?

One other question, sir, on a domestic subject. Are you prepared to state unequivocally that if Congress does pass a Keystone pipeline bill, that you would veto it if it comes to your desk?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I had naturally several interactions with President Putin during the course of the APEC Summit and then here at G20. I would characterize them as typical of our interactions, which are businesslike and blunt. And my communications to him was no different than what I've said publicly as well as what I've said to him privately over the course of this crisis in Ukraine, and that is Russia has the opportunity to take a different path, to resolve the issue of Ukraine in a way that respects Ukraine's sovereignty and is consistent with international law. That is our preference, and if it does so then I will be the first to suggest that we roll back the sanctions that are, frankly, having a devastating effect on the Russian economy.

If he continues down the path that he is on -- violating international law; providing heavy arms to the separatists in Ukraine; violating an agreement that he agreed to just a few weeks ago, the Minsk Agreement, that would have lowered the temperature and the killing in the disputed areas and make providing us a pathway for a diplomatic resolution -- then the isolation that Russia is currently experiencing will continue.

And in my meeting with European leaders, they confirmed their view that so far Russia has not abided by either the spirit or the letter of the agreement that Mr. Putin signed -- or agreed to, and that as a consequence we are going to continue to maintain the economic isolation while maintaining the possibility of a diplomatic solution.

It is not our preference to see Russia isolated the way it is. We would prefer a Russia that is fully integrated with the global economy; that is thriving on behalf of its people; that can once again engage with us in cooperative efforts around global challenges. But we're also very firm on the need to uphold core international principles. And one of those principles is, is that you don't invade other countries or finance proxies and support them in ways that break up a country that has mechanisms for democratic elections.

Q Did you discuss or agree with them on further sanctions?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: At this point, the sanctions that we have in place are biting plenty good. We retain the capabilities, and we have our teams constantly looking at mechanisms in which to turn up additional pressure as necessary.

With respect to Keystone, I've said consistently -- and I think I repeated in Burma, but I guess I've got to answer it one more -- we're going to let the process play itself out. And the determination will be made in the first instance by the Secretary of State. But I won't hide my opinion about this, which is that one major determinant of whether we should approve a pipeline shipping Canadian oil to world markets, not to the United States, is does it contribute to the greenhouse gases that are causing climate change.

Q What were your comments on the pipeline --

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Matt, I got to move on, man. Everybody wants to go home. All right? Other people have questions. Jim Acosta, CNN.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. I wanted to ask you about the climate deal that you agreed to with Chinese President Xi, and on that front but also adding in your expected executive action on immigration, that you're taking executive actions on a multitude of fronts. And I wanted to ask you, sir, what is stopping a future Republican President, or even a Democratic President, from reversing your executive orders? And are you expanding the powers of the presidency in ways that could potentially backfire on your agenda down the road?

And on the battle against ISIS -- your Joint Chiefs Chairman, Martin Dempsey, is in Iraq right now, but at a congressional hearing last week he said he could envision a scenario in which ground forces could be engaged in combat in Iraq alongside Iraqi security forces. I know you've ruled out the possibility of having ground forces -- U.S. ground forces engaged in combat going house to house and so forth. Has your thinking on that changed somewhat, and might General Dempsey be able to convince you otherwise?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Okay. With respect to the climate agreement, the goal that we've set -- a 26 to 28 percent reduction by 2025 -- we shaped that target based on existing authorities rather than the need for additional congressional action.

And I want to be clear here, Jim, that that's based not on particular executive actions that I'm taking, but based on the authority that's been upheld repeatedly by this Supreme Court for the EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency, to be able to shape rules to regulate the emission of greenhouse gases.

Obviously it's supplemented by a bunch of stuff that we're doing that nobody suggests isn't within our authority. For example, the doubling of fuel-efficiency standards on cars is something that we negotiated with the car companies and with labor groups, and is working really well and we're selling a lot of American cars domestically as well as internationally. And they are more fuel-efficient cars and, as a consequence, more popular cars.

With respect to executive actions generally, the record will show that I have actually taken fewer executive actions than my predecessors. Nobody disputes that. What I think has changed is the reaction of some of my friends in Congress to exercising what are normal and, frankly, fairly typical exercises of presidential authority.

You are absolutely right that the very nature of an executive action means that a future President could reverse those actions. But that's always been true. That was true when I came into office; if President Bush had a bunch of executive actions that he had signed, it was part of my authority to reverse them. That's why, for example, on immigration reform it continues to be my great preference to see Congress pass comprehensive legislation, because that is not reversed by a future President, it would have to be reversed by a future Congress. That's part of the reason why I've argued consistently that we're better off if we can get a comprehensive deal through Congress. That's why I showed extraordinary patience with Congress in trying to work a bipartisan deal. That's why I was so encouraged when the Senate produced a bipartisan immigration deal and why I waited for over a year for Speaker Boehner to call that bipartisan bill in the House.

But as I've said before, I can't wait in perpetuity when I have authorities that, at least for the next two years, can improve the system, can allow us to shift more resources to the border rather than separating families; improve the legal immigration system. I would be derelict in my duties if I did not try to improve the system that everybody acknowledges is broken.

With respect to Syria, Chairman Dempsey I think has consistently said in all his testimony, and I would expect him to always do this, to give me his best military advice and to not be constrained by politics. And he has not advised me that I should be sending U.S. troops to fight. What he said in testimony, and what I suspect he'll always say, is that, yes, there are circumstances in which he could envision the deployment of U.S. troops. That's true everywhere, by the way. That's his job, is to think about various contingencies. And, yes, there are always circumstances in which the United States might need to deploy U.S. ground troops.

If we discovered that ISIL had gotten possession of a nuclear weapon, and we had to run an operation to get it out of their hands, then, yes, you can anticipate that not only would Chairman Dempsey recommend me sending U.S. ground troops to get that weapon out of their hands, but I would order it. So the question just ends up being, what are those circumstances. I'm not going to speculate on those. Right now we're moving forward in conjunction with outstanding allies like Australia in training Iraqi security forces to do their job on the ground.

Q -- your thinking on that has not changed?

PRESIDENT OBAMA:My thinking has not changed currently.

Ed Henry of Fox.

Q Thank you.One question, I promise.

PRESIDENT OBAMA:That's great.(Laughter.)

Q At your Burma town hall a couple days ago you tried to inspire young leaders by saying governments need to be held accountable and be responsive to the people.I wonder how you square that with your former advisor, Jonathan Gruber, claiming you were not transparent about the health law?Because in his words, the American people, the voters are stupid.Did you mislead Americans about the taxes, about keeping your plan, in order to get the bill passed?

PRESIDENT OBAMA:No, I did not.I just heard about this.I get well briefed before I come out here.The fact that some advisor who never worked on our staff expressed an opinion that I completely disagree with in terms of the voters, is no reflection on the actual process that was run.

We had a year-long debate, Ed.I mean, go back and look at your stories.The one thing we can't say is that we did not have a lengthy debate about health care in the United States of America, or that it was not adequately covered.I mean, I would just advise all of -- every press outlet here:Go back and pull up every clip, every story, and I think it's fair to say that there was not a provision in the health care law that was not extensively debated and was fully transparent.

Now, there were folks who disagreed with some of these various positions.It was a tough debate.But the good news is -- and I know this wasn't part of your question -- but since some folks back home who don't have health insurance may be watching, open enrollment just started, which means that those who did not take advantage of the marketplaces the first time around, they've got another chance to sign up for affordable health care; they may be eligible for a tax credit.

So far, there were over half a million successful logins on the first day.Healthcare.gov works really well now -- 1.2 million people using the window-shopping function since Sunday.There were 23,000 applications completed in just the first eight hours, and tens of thousands more throughout the day.

Health care is working.More than 10 million people have already gotten health insurance; millions more are eligible.And contrary to some of the predictions of the naysayers, not only is the program working, but we've actually seen health care inflation lower than it's been in 50 years, which is contributing to us reducing the deficit, and has the effect of making premiums for families lower that they otherwise would have been if they have health insurance.

All right? Kristen Welker.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. I'd like to ask you again about Syria. When you were recently asked about the U.S. campaign against ISIS, you said, "It's too early to say whether we are winning." You went on to say, "This is going to be a long-term plan." There are now reports that you have ordered a review of your entire Syria policy. So I'd like to put the question to you today: Are you currently recalibrating your policy in Syria? And does that include plans to remove President Bashar al-Assad? And was it a miscalculation not to focus on the removal of Assad initially? Thank you.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: We have a weekly meeting with my CENTCOM Commander, with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, with all our diplomatic personnel related to the region, as well as my national security team, and Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, intelligence teams, to assess what kind of progress are we making both in Iraq and in Syria with respect to ISIL. And I will be having weekly meetings as long as this campaign lasts, because I think it's very important for us to get it right.

We have not had a comprehensive review of Syria. We've had a comprehensive review of what are we doing each and every week -- what's working, what's not. Some of it is very detailed at the tactical level. Some of it is conceptual. We continue to learn about ISIL -- where its weaknesses are; how we can more effectively put pressure on them. And so nothing extraordinary, nothing formal of the sort that you describe has taken place.

Certainly no changes have taken place with respect to our attitude towards Bashar al-Assad. And I've said this before, but let me reiterate: Assad has ruthlessly murdered hundreds of thousands of his citizens, and as a consequence has completely lost legitimacy with the majority of the country. For us to then make common cause with him against ISIL would only turn more Sunnis in Syria in the direction of supporting ISIL, and would weaken our coalition that sends a message around the region this is not a fight against Sunni Islam, this is a fight against extremists of any stripe who are willing to behead innocent people or kill children, or mow down political prisoners with the kind of wanton cruelty that I think we've very rarely seen in the modern age.

And so we have communicated to the Syrian regime that when we operate going after ISIL in their air space, that they would be well-advised not to take us on. But beyond that, there's no expectation that we are going to in some ways enter an alliance with Assad. He is not credible in that country.

Now, we are looking for a political solution eventually within Syria that is inclusive of all the groups who live there -- the Alawite, the Sunni, Christians. And at some point, the people of Syria and the various players involved, as well as the regional players -- Turkey, Iran, Assad's patrons like Russia -- are going to have to engage in a political conversation.

And it's the nature of diplomacy in any time, certainly in this situation, where you end up having diplomatic conversations potentially with people that you don't like and regimes that you don't like. But we're not even close to being at that stage yet.

Q But just to put a fine point on it -- are you actively discussing ways to remove him as a part of that political transition?

PRESIDENT OBAMA:No.

Major Garrett.

Q Thank you, Mr. President.As you well know, the continuing resolution expires on December 11th.Many things you've talked about on this trip are related to that:funding for coalition operations in Iraq and Syria, the Ebola outbreak, not to mention day-to-day government operations.What are the odds the country will see itself in a shutdown scenario?How much do you fear the government will shut down?And to what degree does your anxiety about this or your team's anxiety about this influence the timing of your decision on immigration and executive action?

PRESIDENT OBAMA:I take Mitch McConnell at his word when he says that the government is not going to shut down.There is no reason for it to shut down.We traveled down that path before.It was bad for the country, it was bad for every elected official in Washington.And at the end of the day, it was resolved in the same way that it would have been resolved if we hadn't shut the government down.So that's not going to be productive, and I think that Leader McConnell and Speaker Boehner understand that.

But this goes to a broader point that I've made previously and I'll just reiterate:It is in the nature of democracy that the parties are going to disagree on certain issues.And in our system, because we don't have a parliamentary system, it means that you can have a Congress of one party and a President of another, and they disagree on some really fundamental issues.And the question then is, how do you deal with that?Well, the sensible way to deal with it is to say here are the issues we don't agree on, and we'll fight like heck for our position and then we'll work together on the issues that we do agree on.And that's how it's always been; that's how it was with Ronald Reagan when he was dealing with a Democratic Congress.There was no -- at no point did the Democrats say, well, because we don't agree with Ronald Reagan on X,Y,Z issue, then we can't work with him on Social Security reform or tax reform or other issues.He said, okay, we'll fight on that, we'll join together on that, and as a consequence the country will make progress.

And I would expect that same attitude in this instance.I understand that there are members of the Republican Party who deeply disagree with me and law enforcement and the evangelical community and a number of their own Republican colleagues about the need for immigration reform, I get that.And they've made their views clear and there's nothing wrong with them arguing their position and opposing legislation.But why they would then decide we're going to shut down the government makes about as much sense as my decision to shut down the government if they decide to take a vote to repeal health care reform for the -- is it 53rd or 55th time?I mean, I understand that there's a difference there, but let's keep on doing the people's business.

Q Does the shutdown anxiety in any way affect your timing at all on immigration action?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: No, I think the main concern I have is making sure that we get it right, and that's what we're focused on at this point, because any executive action that I take is going to require some adjustments to how DHS, the Department of Homeland Security, operates where it's deploying resources, et cetera; how are folks processed; what priorities are set up. And so I want to make sure that we've crossed all our T's and dotted all our I's -- that that's my main priority.

And we are going to close with Jim Avila.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Following up on immigration -- in 2010, when asked by immigration reform advocates to stop deportations and act alone on providing legal status for the undocumented, you said, "I'm President, I'm not king. I can't do these things just by myself." In 2013, you said, "I'm not the emperor of the United States. My job is to execute laws that are passed." Mr. President, what has changed since then? And since you've now had a chance to talk since July with your legal advisors, what do you now believe are your limits so that you can continue to act as President and not as emperor or king?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, actually, my position hasn't changed. When I was talking to the advocates, their interest was in me, through executive action, duplicating the legislation that was stalled in Congress. And getting a comprehensive deal of the sort that is in the Senate legislation, for example, does extend beyond my legal authorities. There are certain things I cannot do. There are certain limits to what falls within the realm of prosecutorial discretion in terms of how we apply existing immigration laws.

And what we've continued to do is to talk to Office of Legal Counsel that's responsible for telling us what the rules are, what the scope of our operations are, and determining where it is appropriate for us to say we're not going to deport 11 million people. On the other hand, we've got severe resource constraints right now at the border not in apprehending people, but in processing and having enough immigration judges and so forth. And so what's within our authority to do in reallocating resources and reprioritizing since we can't do everything. And it's on that basis that I'll be making a decision about any executive actions that I might take.

I will repeat what I have said before: There is a very simple solution to this perception that somehow I'm exercising too much executive authority. Pass a bill I can sign on this issue. If Congress passes a law that solves our border problems, improves our legal immigration system, and provides a pathway for the 11 million people who are here working in our kitchens, working in farms, making beds in hotels, everybody knows they're there, we're not going to deport all of them. We'd like to see them being able, out in the open, to pay their taxes, pay a penalty, get right with the law. Give me a bill that addresses those issues -- I'll be the first one to sign it and, metaphorically, I'll crumple up whatever executive actions that we take and we'll toss them in the wastebasket, because we will now have a law that addresses these issues.

Q But in those five months, sir, since you said you were going to act, have you received the legal advice from the Attorney General about what limits you have --

PRESIDENT OBAMA:Yes.

Q -- and what you can do?

PRESIDENT OBAMA:Yes.

Q And would you tell us what those are?

PRESIDENT OBAMA:No.(Laughter.)I will tell them when I make the announcement.But it's a good try, though.That was a good angle.(Laughter.)Jim and I go way back, although he was famous, I was not.He used to be a broadcaster in Chicago, so I used to watch him on TV.You've aged a little better than I have.(Laughter.)

All right.The people of Australia, thank you again for your wonderful hospitality.
(Applause.)

END

4:51 P.M. AEST